

# VERNACULAR WORLD MAKING:

## E. San Juan, Jr. and the Rehearsal for the New International

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### Abstract

Focusing on E. San Juan, Jr.'s *The Radical Tradition in Philippine Literature*, which forms the matrix of his thought as a historical materialist critic, this essay traces the development of a central argument in the author's body of work: namely, Philippine literature—diverse in form, expansive in reach—is progressive and revolutionary. Using such a fundamental argument with complex effects, I explore its implications for rethinking not only the scope of Philippine literature, but also for reimagining human solidarity, which San Juan aptly terms the New International. As I will suggest, the New International is an important form of planetary consciousness from below that offers an alternative account of internationalism, one that signifies the incorporation of the dispossessed everywhere as new historical agents. To understand this original concept, I will argue, is to grasp the historical truth of decolonization wherein the unprecedented conjuncture of Marxism, anti-colonialism, and vernacularism has enabled the revision of human solidarity that proceeds from the non-totalizing universality of the vernacular, a concept that has huge consequences not only for revitalizing the political philosophy of freedom, but also, and perhaps more important, for securing its flourishing in the future.

### Keywords

Anti-colonialism, decolonization, E. San Juan, Jr., Marxism, New International, planetarity, subaltern, vernacularism

### About the Author

Poet, critic, and translator, Charlie Samuya Veric holds a PhD in American Studies from Yale University where he was a member of the Working Group on Globalization and Culture and the Photographic Memory Workshop. His critical essays have appeared in *American Quarterly*, *Common Knowledge*, *E-misferica*, *Kritika Kultura*, *Philippine Studies*, *Rethinking History*, and *Social Text*, among others. An Assistant Professor of English at the Ateneo de Manila University, he is the author of the bestselling and acclaimed debut poetry collection, *Histories*. His second book of poetry, *Boyhood*, is forthcoming from the Ateneo de Manila University Press.

In “Pagsasanay Para sa Bagong Internasyonal” [Rehearsal for the New International], one of the poems in *Mahal Magpakailanman* [*Beloved Forever*], E. San Juan, Jr. reflects on the consequences of a Filipino vernacular response to the death of a pop star. He writes, naming the subaltern politics of a planetary grief:

Nang huling tumilaok si Michael Jackson

nagluksa ang buong mundo, pati mga hayop sa zoo sa

London, Paris, Tokyo, at Kathmandu

*(Bangon sa pagkakabusabos)*

Nakiramay pati mga nakadilaw na monghe sa templo sa Bangkok.

Pati na ang 1,500 bilanggo sa Cebu Provincial Detention & Rehabilitation Center.

Dagling nagsanay sa tugtog ng “Thriller,” mahigit 9 oras, naka-orange sila.

Sabi ni Wenjiel Resane, presong gumaganap bilang kaibigang babae ni Jackson:

“Nalungkot kami, nawala ang aming idolo”

Dagdag ni Crisanto Nero, 38, sa papel ni Jackson:

“Tuwa kaming bantog ang video namin sa YouTube.”

*(Kaisipa’y palayain)*

When Michael Jackson crowed his last

the whole world grieved, even the beasts in the zoos

of London, Paris, and Kathmandu.

*(Arise from wretchedness)*

Even the yellow-clad monks in the temples of Bangkok condoled.

Even the 1,500 prisoners of Cebu Provincial Detention & Rehabilitation Center.

Swiftly rehearsing to the tune of “Thriller” for more than 9 hours, dressed in orange.

Says Wenjiel Resane, prisoner who plays Jackson’s female friend:

“We’re saddened, our idol passed away.”

Crisanto Nero, 38, intones, as Jackson:

“We’re glad our video is famous on YouTube.”

*(Emancipate Consciousness)*

Like his other poems in Filipino, “Pagsasanay Para sa Bagong Internasyonal” draws on actual events in which the nameless come to enter the stage of world history. In this case, however, the world historical event is not so much the death of a celebrated singer but, rather, and perhaps more important, the response from the prisoners of Cebu, a small island where the tortured futures of global modernity were unleashed when Spanish conquest had been met with native resistance in 1521. Here, it seems to me, lies the significance of San Juan’s poem in that it highlights the anti-colonial memory that molds the Filipino prisoners’ expression of international solidarity with the black icon:

Dumarami ang bilang ng mga bilanggo (di anabot ng “Anak” ni

Freddie Aguilar) sanhi sa matinding paghihikahos,

salamat sa grasya ng rehimeng US-Arroyo.

Samantala, patuloy ang *exercise* ng ating mga kababayan.

Ewan ko kung may “Thriller” ding sinasanay ang mga OFW sa

Dubai, Abu Dabi, Roma, Singapore, Hong Kong—

Nasaan si Lorna Laraquel sa kanyang piitan malapit sa piramide  
at espinghe sa Ehipto.

*(Ito'y huling paglalaban)*

Sa kabila ng lahat, masaya si Gwendolyn Lador, ang  
choreographer, sa patuloy na pagsasayaw ng mga bilanggo.  
Tatak-Pinoy iyon, di kamukha nina Charice Pempengco at kung  
sinu-sino pang nagtitinda sa sarili sa Las Vegas at mga  
putahang pangkultural sa Kanluran  
(parunggit ni Freddie).

The number of prisoners is increasing (untouched by Freddie Aguilar's

“Anak”) due to extreme poverty,  
thanks to the benevolence of the US-Arroyo regime.  
Meanwhile, our compatriots' exercise continues.

I don't know if there's a “Thriller” that the OFWs are rehearsing  
in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Rome, Singapore, Hong Kong—

Where is Lorna Laraquel in her cell near the pyramids and sphinxes of Egypt.

*(It's the final struggle)*

Despite all, Gwendolyn Lador, choreographer,  
is cheerful about the prisoners' tireless dancing.  
That's trademark Pinoy, unlike Charice Pempengco  
and whoever else who peddle themselves in Las Vegas

and the cultural whorehouses of the West

(Freddie quips).

For San Juan, then, the combination of native resistance and international solidarity in the prisoners' dance is unmistakably Pinoy, a vintage articulation of the insurgent Filipino imagination whose long arc extends from the days of Magellan's death on the shores of Mactan to the age of OFWs in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Singapore, and Hong Kong today.

The poem's structure highlights this conversation between planetary event and vernacular response when it foregrounds the insurrectionary creativity of the prisoners as refrains from "The Internationale" run in the background. Organized thus, the poem sounds very much like a call and response wherein the descriptions of the prisoners' dance become riffs on the socialist anthem, as if suggesting that the prisoners' dance is one enactment of international solidarity among many, an internationalism by other means in which the dispossessed assert their humanity in their own way. The dance consequently signifies the living labor of the dispossessed, their aspiration for a better life for all, which spreads everywhere as soon as it is videotaped and uploaded to the Internet, one that gets a million views within 24 hours of the black icon's death. The prisoners' dance, in other words, represents the Filipino vernacular expression on an international scale, a planetarity from below marking the emergence of the New International, the wretched of the earth arising from bondage with a free consciousness.

So, what exactly is this New International? Why should we take pains not to view it, as Benedict Anderson does, as the ravings of a fossilized mind let loose from reality? As I will try to suggest, the vernacular example of New Internationalism has much to say about the nature of Filipino cultural expression in particular, and the common future of human life in general, one that stands for freedom for all. This New Internationalism, I will suggest further, is an important form of planetary consciousness from below, which can serve as an antidote to the kind of internationalism that the technocrats of American hegemony are imposing on the rest of the world. Most important, this New Internationalism denotes a new phase in human history, one that remains to be defined and recognized for the radical contribution it makes to the subaltern imagination of perpetual freedom on earth. As will become clear, San Juan helps us to grasp a new form of human solidarity that differs from the way internationalism is understood in Western Marxist thought from the founding of the First International in 1864 to the formation of the Fourth International in the years leading to the outbreak of the Second World

War. At the heart of this New Internationalism, I will suggest toward the end of this essay, is the historical peculiarity of decolonization as an unprecedented phenomenon that instantiates the subaltern experience of the historical world, embodying a vernacular world making. To begin to delineate the lineages of the New International, I will return to a less studied, if not completely obscure, tome in San Juan's massive body of work, *The Radical Tradition in Philippine Literature*. Why such a book given the far more cited publications from leading presses, such as *Racism and Cultural Studies* and *Beyond Postcolonial Theory*, for example? And why define the New International using *The Radical Tradition in Philippine Literature* given its ostensibly national orientation? I can name three reasons.

First, the 1971 book was originally published in the Philippines, a fact that must not be overlooked especially in light of San Juan's insistence on addressing the homeland from "his diasporic station of exile" (*From Globalization to National Liberation* 242). In *Beyond Postcolonial Theory*, for example, San Juan emphasizes the ways in which his ideas have their origins in the Philippines, particularly in his teaching and speaking engagements at the Ateneo de Manila University and the various campuses of the University of the Philippines across the nation. In *Mediations*, he makes the connection between exile and homeland even clearer when he says that its publication in Manila "represents a crossing of borders and time zones emblematic of the crisis of transnational capitalism" (v). Though exiled by choice and circumstance, San Juan never loses sight of his audience in the homeland. As one of his poems puts it, Bukas, May-nilad! Tomorrow, see you in Manila!

Second, *The Radical Tradition in Philippine Literature* marks a seminal moment in his development as an intellectual, denoting his rejection of his own formalist orientation, the roots of which go back to his days at the University of the Philippines as an undergraduate, to a more historical materialist critic whose politicization was hastened by his exposure to the Civil Rights Movement on American soil. Published four years after the release of his book on Oscar Wilde from Princeton University Press in 1967, *The Radical Tradition in Philippine Literature* signals San Juan's suicidal abandonment of his professional training at Harvard University from 1960 to 1965 during which he studied with the preeminent American scholar of English literature, Douglas Bush, whose former students went on to take leadership positions at the most elite institutions of higher learning in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Had San Juan decided to pursue his graduate education to its conclusion, there would be no celebration of his work in Manila, no canon of a distinctly radical Filipino critique as we know it today.<sup>2</sup> Instead, some American university would be commemorating a distinguished Victorianist, perhaps the only person of color in a room of frosty defenders of high culture. Imagine that, if you can.

Third, *The Radical Tradition in Philippine Literature* proposes a rather peculiar understanding of the national, at least as far as conventional Philippine criticism is concerned, and the place of the radical in it. Here, the national is understood as the vernacular that cannot be separated from the totality of human history. As I have argued elsewhere in a review of his poetry, San Juan presents us with a more expanded conception of Philippine literature that includes Filipino constituencies in motion, one that represents a break from the conception of the homeland as a bounded territory from Francisco Balagtas, to José Rizal, to Amado V. Hernandez, to Bienvenido Lumbera.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, San Juan underscores the planetary aspects of being Filipino, which is of a piece with his notion of New Internationalism, about which we will learn more shortly. San Juan's example is especially relevant because he allows us to reflect on planetary thinking from below that can challenge the dominance of top-down approaches, the prime example of which is globalization. The crucial element in San Juan's planetary imagination is its insistence on the vernacular, a New Internationalism wherein the imagination of totality highlights the historical specificity of subaltern world making.

Taken together, these reasons identify *The Radical Tradition in Philippine Literature* as a pivotal site of thinking about the New International in that it underscores the following. It calls attention to the negotiation between diaspora and homeland, and accordingly provides a planetary dimension to San Juan's thought. It reveals the historical materialist position that defines much of his work, one that will clarify why the international plays such an important role in his thinking given its emphasis on totality. Most significant of all, it stresses the radical as a tradition in Philippine literature, which affords us a unified theory of the vernacular as the international. That is to say, the kind of internationalism that emanates from the Filipino example is nothing but the vernacular on a planetary scale, a planetarity of the vernacular, if you will, a phenomenon that is unprecedented in the history of human striving on earth whose conceptual features and analytic powers have never been defined with much satisfaction yet.

Allow me, then, to provide a brief genealogy of the New International, which I will locate in San Juan's idea of the insurgent Filipino tradition. In *The Radical Tradition in Philippine Literature*, the *locus classicus* of San Juan's historical materialist thought, he contends that such tradition in Philippine writing "exists in the center of the socio-economic process and the internal contradictions of the given period which it reflects and artistically mediates. One distinguishing quality shared by those identified with this tradition is the deliberate use, or intuitive application, of the historical sense. The concrete and practical dynamics of the social life of the nation can only be accurately expressed by an imagination that consciously participates in the larger historical process" (iv). The radical tradition, in other words, is art that is rooted in the contradictions of the society in which



it finds itself, contradictions that it seeks to mediate and transform in the hope of moving humanity into what San Juan eloquently calls “the realm of freedom by the knowledge and control of the realm of material necessity” (iv). What fulfills such knowledge and control is what San Juan terms the historical sense, the capacity, in his own words, to grasp the truth as a “question of social practice, of revolutionary action” (v).

The question of art for San Juan is therefore the politics of partisan aesthetics, which emerges from and strives to intervene in the domain of class struggle. Art, he writes, “is a product of and weapon in class struggle” (6). One could have written such a statement anywhere in the turbulent period of the 1960s until the 1970s and it would have proven true in many places. That is to say, such a position is standard in Marxist thought, but one should be quick to caution that San Juan is using it in a specifically Filipino context: the long “tradition of revolt embodied in Balagtas’ poetry, in the *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*, in the works of Bonifacio and Mabini, in the ‘Aves de Rapiña’ editorial, in the numerous writings in the vernacular” (108). This idea constitutes the core of San Juan’s thesis—Philippine literature is “essentially progressive and revolutionary” (3). Put differently, the radical tradition in Philippine literature refers to the continuity of a key stance that manifests itself in revolutionary and profoundly anti-colonial thought and practice of the Filipino people. It should be noted that the vernacular in San Juan’s definition of the Filipino radical tradition is not simply a linguistic condition but also a heuristic device. Namely, the vernacular constitutes the language of the anti-colonial thought of the Filipino people as much as it represents an anti-colonial political stance or subject position. It is a form of expression as well as a frame of mind. Such is the spirit of the Filipino radical tradition *in* the vernacular.

From the publication of *The Radical Tradition in Philippine Literature* to the release of *Balikbayang Sinta* 37 years later, San Juan reiterates such thesis with remarkable consistency, which may form the very backbone of his critical canon, the lasting thought that defines his legacy. Consider the following cases. In *Towards a People’s Literature*, printed more than a decade after *The Radical Tradition in Philippine Literature*, San Juan writes that the former is a “reaffirmation of our progressive, national-democratic cultural tradition” (xiii). Ten years later, the same argument can be found in *Allegories of Resistance*, wherein he proposes that the strategy of critique should be viewed as the “strategy of the renewal of our democratic-popular revolutionary tradition” (xi). Two years hence, San Juan recasts the same argument in *History and Form*, arguing that the “weapon of our inexhaustible revolutionary tradition” has the power to move the country forward “from the realm of necessity, of commodity-fetishism and the reification of life under global capital, into the realm of freedom” (15). More than a decade after, San Juan’s faith in “a rich, sustainable revolutionary tradition that informs the



daily acts of resistance and modes of forbearance and survival” (xi) of the Filipino radical is undiminished in one of his last books to date, *From Globalization to National Liberation*. Although some of the volumes contain essentially the same essays, with some revisions here and there, which can be a virtual nightmare for a bibliographer, it is remarkable how San Juan, from book to book for almost half a century, has unfailingly advanced the idea of the radical tradition in the Filipino cultural imagination.

But how does the Filipino radical tradition, anti-colonial in provenance and freedom loving in aspiration, relate to the New International? The answer lies in the peculiar form of Filipino nationalism whose physiognomy signifies the unique conjuncture of collective forces. Namely, Filipino nationalism represents the world historical convergence of anti-colonialism, Marxism, and vernacular imagination, a conceptual combination that has immense consequences for the way we think about human freedom. Indeed, these elements—Marxism, anti-colonialism, and vernacularism—define, as San Juan conceives it, the spirit of the Filipino radical tradition, elements whose developments are local as much as they are planetary. Anti-colonialism, for example, is a response to three hundred years of Spanish colonization, four hundred if we include the succeeding imperial experiments of the Americans and Japanese in the Philippines. That imperialism is a global event need not be belabored here, and the same can be said about the rise and spread of Marxist thought. But what is unique in the formulation of San Juan, which makes the Filipino radical tradition special, is his insistence on the vernacular, or the specificity of the Filipino historical experience, and its place in the totality of human striving for freedom. The specialness of the Filipino historical experience lies, it seems to me, in the creative tension between the vernacular and the international, one that constitutes the conceptual core of New Internationalism whose features can be gleaned from San Juan’s union of two terms—“Philippine” on one hand, “radical” on the other. As we shall see, both terms name the planetary scale of the vernacular experience that represents a new way of conceiving the substance and form of the international, one that accounts for the newness of what may be termed the internationalism of the vernacular.

Take San Juan’s discussion of Philippine literature. At first glance, the international is not evident in Philippine literature given its national scope. But a closer look reveals a more complex and capacious practice. Just consider its linguistic diversity. San Juan’s 35-word definition alone identifies at least three languages in this tradition, four if we include the author’s English: the Tagalog of Balagtas and Bonifacio, the Spanish of Rizal and Mabini, and the other numerous writings in the vernacular grouped together. Seen this way, Philippine literature is unique in that it eschews the monolingualism of the German, French, and Italian models of national literature, to cite a few examples. Philippine literature is therefore a

convenient heuristic device that is used to refer to a tradition, but its actual practice testifies to a much broader, worldlier practice. As such, Philippine literature, given its diversity, may be construed more as a vernacular incubator of multiculturalism, multilingualism, and multinationalism—issues that we often associate with world literature. As I have argued in “What the Planetary Filipino Should Know,” the logic and dynamism of world literature lies at the heart of Filipino literature. And what makes it unique is precisely its capacity to imagine the world not from the center but, rather, from the periphery. To think of Philippine literature, then, is to vernacularize the world.

What is more, the capaciousness of Philippine literature lies in its heroic attempt to infuse world languages with vernacular experience. In writing his novels in Spanish in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, Rizal effectively paved the way for the Filipino vernacular to enter the stream of European consciousness. Using the lingua franca of his time, he created an imaginative space in which the vernacular longings of the natives were immortalized in a language that had drawn on the conflict between the familiar and foreign in the colonial setting—namely, the tension between Filipino content and Spanish language. In describing the vernacular experience using the language of conquest, Rizal essentially created an allegory of the vernacular going planetary, making the vernacular experience legible to distant readers in Europe and beyond. In doing so, he reversed the trajectory of conquest: the vernacular came finally to address the world.

The conception of Philippine literature in expanded form accordingly brings to light the unique dialectic that ensues from the give-and-take between the vernacular and the planetary wherein anti-colonialism initiates the possibility of imagining totality through the eyes of the subjugated. This, for me, is the power of the Filipino radical tradition: a people aspiring to self-determination totalize the planet and all that it represents from a position of dispossession. Where Western imperialism seeks to totalize the world by dispossessing the majority, the radical Filipino vernacular attempts to totalize in the hope of eliminating the conditions that produce the immiseration of many. Where the former totalizes to dispossess, the latter totalizes to create the free who will transform society, to borrow San Juan’s formulation, “into one where there are no exploiters, where all citizens can live and work for the common good” (*The Radical Tradition in Philippine Literature* 116). This, in a word, is the logic of the New International.

Such a vernacular dream of freedom for all is precisely what propels San Juan’s notion of the radical in Philippine literature. And similar to the capaciousness of the Filipino vernacular experience, the definition of the radical in San Juan also gestures toward the vernacular on a planetary scale. As we shall see, San Juan’s conception of the radical substantiates the peculiar combination of anti-colonial

thought, Marxist aspiration, and the vernacular experience as a planetary event. But first let us go back to his comprehension of radicalism, which begins with the notion of “literature and art as a radical critique of life” (108), by which he means the participation of the creative practice in the “imagination of the class struggle and its faithful depiction” (106). As I have mentioned earlier, art is partisan for San Juan, one that offers itself to the promotion of the rights of the dispossessed majority. To take this stance is to uphold what he calls the historical sense—the assumption of a dialectical materialist position that asserts, in his own words, “the moving totality of the concrete social-historical process as the valid framework within which we try to comprehend the objective laws of motion, of natural and social development, in life” (3). The radical, in that sense, is not simply the kind of art that aspires to imagine the tensions in a given social field, but also, and perhaps more important to our discussion of New Internationalism, grasps what San Juan calls the moving totality of the concrete social-historical process. This is a complex formulation whose robustness some scholars of Philippine criticism have missed, but this unfortunately is not the place for me to consider its complexity.<sup>4</sup>

In the interest of space and topicality, I wish to highlight instead San Juan’s emphasis on totality in his notion of the radical, a systemic tendency that he derives from Marxist thought that he ends up enriching using a specifically vernacular standpoint. Note, for instance, how he invokes totality in the following statement. “Reality,” he writes, “is the differentiated *totality* of the concrete process” (2; emphasis added). “All human action—art and literature included—participates,” he says, “in the *totality* of the historical process” (4; emphasis added). The task of the artist, for him, is the “cognition and creative rendering of the entire process of life as the *totality* of sensuously concrete motive forces” (6; emphasis added). Even the university, he points out, “exists within the *totality* of social relations in a given historical process” (101; emphasis added). “In the *totality* of the social process in our present era,” he says once more, “the artist is called upon to exercise the function of preserving the humanistic progressive tradition of our culture” (111; emphasis added). What is the point of all this talk about totality? I offer two likely answers.

First, San Juan’s take on totality calls attention to his attempt to bring Western Marxism to bear on Philippine literature. In doing so, he subjects the latter to the scrutiny of the former. Critics such as Virgilio Almario have castigated San Juan for precisely this reason, arguing that he is using his Harvard pedigree and comfortable exile in America to tutor his neglected compatriots in the exacting ways of Marxism. Although some truth can be gleaned from such an attack, and I, in fact, would count myself among the first to wonder why San Juan has chosen *not* to come back to the Philippines for good, this criticism shows bad faith, and it does little to advance our education. Indeed, such criticism fails to account for

San Juan's laudable and sometimes solitary efforts to vernacularize Marxism in the context of the Filipino radical tradition, which leads me to the second answer.

In emphasizing totality as a crucial component of Philippine literature, San Juan not only connects Marxism to Philippine realities, but also inserts the potential of the vernacular in comprehending, and ultimately changing, the logic of capitalist modernity. To understand the significance of San Juan's attempt to vernacularize Marxism, we have to turn to one of his late essays in which he critiques the postcolonial orthodoxy that promotes, against all its best interests, the end of Marxism. As will become clear, his arguments in this late work, entitled "Postcolonialism and the Problematic of Uneven Development," have long been anticipated by his early thoughts in *The Radical Tradition in Philippine Literature*, which came out 31 years before the article's inclusion in an anthology edited by Crystal Bartolovich and Neil Lazarus in 2002. In this late work, San Juan revisits the imagination of the Orient in Marx to make a point about the continuing relevance of Marxism, especially when it is viewed from the periphery. San Juan's article does so to question the dominant tendencies in postcolonial studies that favor the tenets of fragmentation, hybridity, ambivalence, and even meaninglessness to the marginalization of core concepts like totality, universals, and systemic analyses that lie at the heart of Marxism. The "most blatant flaw of postcolonial orthodoxy (establishment postcolonialism employing a poststructuralist organon) lies," San Juan argues, "in its refusal to grasp the category of capitalist modernity *in all its global ramifications*" (222; emphasis added). In other words, postcolonialism has lost its critical edge when it abandoned the comprehension of what San Juan had called earlier in *The Radical Tradition in Philippine Literature* as the totality of the concrete social-historical process, which in the current article he now terms capitalist modernity.

To restore the critical power of postcolonial critique that draws on the value of totality, San Juan returns to the notion of Asiatic mode of production, a condition often associated with India and, to a lesser extent, China. Marx theorized this notion in the 1850s during which the non-Western polity wielded superordinate authority, thereby controlling land ownership and police power, a monopoly that resulted in widespread despotism and impoverishment. This was, and continues to be, a hotly debated concept given its Orientalist depiction of Asiatic society as one mired in fallacies and fantasies. Edward Said, for example, wrote a damning critique of how it served to prop up European imperialist projects by representing Asiatic society as one needing to be civilized and, therefore, to be rescued from itself. But San Juan begs to differ. For him, the concept calls attention to the comparative desire in Marx to understand the uneven development of capitalism wherein the Asiatic mode of production came to signify the gaps in economic development, namely, the absence in such a society of properties that were identified to have contributed

to European vitality: the middle class, private property, bourgeois institutions. As such, the Asiatic society is something of an anomaly that might have held for Marx an unexpected possibility, an idea that he captured in his 1853 letter to the *New York Tribune* where he asked if it was possible to imagine humankind fulfilling its destiny without a major social revolution in Asia.

Put differently, the Asiatic mode of production signaled a distant and intractable reality that Marx could not fully comprehend, but one that he needed to take into account to arrive at a more robust understanding of world-systems. This, in San Juan's estimation, is an instantiation of Marx's rightful insistence on totality and a healthy respect for the untotalizable, indicating his sensitivity to what the former calls "the heterogeneous and disparate motions of diverse collectivities" (225). That is to say, Marx wanted a grand unified theory of capitalist modernity but he was smart enough to admit that he did not know it all. The Asiatic mode of production therefore denotes how the limits of Marxism, especially when it comes to confront the realities of distant peripheries, can turn into unforeseen utopian possibilities. Marxism for San Juan accordingly "views the world not as a closed totality," but as a coordinated whole with irreducible divergences. The Asiatic society is a figure of such divergence within the uneven world-system of capitalist modernity, and it embodies, for San Juan, the urgency of destroying the paralyzing and the moribund to fulfill our human destiny to make histories, for only in doing so can we release, following Walter Benjamin, the energies of revolutionary change.

It is crucial to point out, however, that the destruction of all that Asiatic society represents belongs not to Marx anymore, or to the British Empire or to the West in general, but to the people from the periphery who rise to meet the new future of their lives. This is where the vernacular becomes significant, and where San Juan precisely introduces the role of the vernacular in rethinking Marxism from below. For is it not clear that San Juan's gloss on the eradication of Asiatic society is actually a reference to the Filipino revolutions from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onward whose aim was likewise to release the energies of revolutionary change? Is it not clear that the Asiatic society that Marx names is the kind of society that the radical tradition in Philippine literature aims precisely to abolish? The Philippines does not figure in Marx's imagination of Asiatic society, make no mistake about it, but *that* exactly is what San Juan does in so many ways. He brings the Filipino vernacular tradition of revolutionary change in conversation with the original spirit of Marxism to produce a more nuanced understanding of capitalist modernity and how it can be interpreted, and changed ultimately.

Hence San Juan vernacularizes Marxism by pointing out the gaps in the uneven development of capitalist modernity. Reading the Asiatic mode of production as a sign of a different possibility for comprehending the laws of capitalist modernity,



San Juan accordingly lays bare how such a different possibility can emanate as a vernacular critique from the periphery. The trope of Asiatic society, in this sense, represents the vernacular perspective from the periphery whose intervention in the understanding of capitalist modernity opens up the possibility of changing the world in a fuller and better way simply because it is grasped as a divergent totality. As he explains it in another context, he is “neither a nativist postcolonial subaltern nor a cosmopolitan world-citizen, just a Filipino activist trying to Filipinize the Marxist-Leninist practice of freedom in acts of social transformation, in a sustained, principled collaboration with others at home and around the world” (*Balikbayang Sinta* 212).

With such a statement, we come full circle in our attempt to begin to make sense of New Internationalism that, as I have tried to suggest, arises from the peculiar form of Filipino nationalism as a specific but systemic conjuncture of anti-colonialism, Marxist thought, and the vernacular experience. For as San Juan himself reveals in no uncertain terms, he is a thinker who vernacularizes the utopian insights of Marxism in the context of the radical tradition in the Philippines. And he takes pains to stress that what he calls the practice of freedom in acts of social transformation draws on the experiences of others with similar fates around the world. It bears pointing out that San Juan was already engaged with the ideas of Frantz Fanon in his 1971 book, perhaps the first Filipino intellectual to do so less than a decade after the translation of Fanon’s work into English in 1963. Such an expression of international solidarity would be articulated in the succeeding works of San Juan. In *Allegories of Resistance*, for example, he confesses that the book owes its existence to the vernacular struggles in the Philippines in the 1960s and the 1970s, “as much as to the heroic struggles of the Indo-Chinese, Palestinian, Latin American, and African peoples” (xi), arguing further that “we should always maintain an internationalist vision in helping others and welcoming their support” (xv). In *History and Form*, he boldly proposes that “the ideas of revolutionary socialism *appropriately indigenized or adapted to our concrete situation*—not only of Western thinkers but also more decisively of Frantz Fanon, Ho Chi Minh, Che Guevara, Amilcar Cabral, C.L.R. James, Mao Zedong and others—are now a vital part of the Filipino heritage just as they are a permanent heritage of humankind” (14; emphasis added). In *Balikbayang Sinta*, he reiterates how anti-colonial nationalist movements mediate the Enlightenment narratives of sovereignty, invoking the likes of Gandhi.

Such declarations unambiguously reveal the analytic power of a universalizing vernacularism in which the global experience of dispossession becomes an optic for comprehending historically specific conditions, one that refracts the visions of European Enlightenment to offer an ampler conception of vernacular freedom. It is not beyond human imagination to think, then, that when a proper history of

our present conjuncture will be written, this auspicious time may be described, without any exaggeration, as the moment of the Second Enlightenment. For what Marx could only ask rhetorically in his 1853 *New York Tribune* letter in which he wondered if humankind could fulfill its destiny without a major social revolution in Asia, the radical thinkers from the decolonizing world would strive, a hundred years later, to realize as their historical duty. This is what San Juan fittingly calls the original humane culture in the periphery that resides in the “revolutionary power of native agency” (*Mediations* 19). Without a doubt, this is the spirit that breathes life into the vernacular concept of New Internationalism, an expression of planetary solidarity founded on the subaltern imagination of perpetual freedom that aims to renew life on the face of the earth.

But what significance, the skeptic among us might suspect, can a definition of New Internationalism offer beyond the high rhetoric of dispossession? A lot. And much of this involves two interrelated issues. First, the definition of New Internationalism clarifies the radical nature of the vernacular as a method of planetary solidarity, giving us a clearer understanding of internationalism as a specifically subaltern phenomenon of vernacular world making. Second, its definition illuminates the historical contribution of decolonization to its formation, a relationship whose role in expanding the understanding of freedom cannot be stated enough.

Let me deal for now with the first issue concerning the philosophical poverty of internationalism, which has made it susceptible to being appropriated to advance powerful interests in an age where market-driven and state-sponsored solidarities dominate. Perry Anderson reminds us, for instance, that internationalism as a concept is at best indeterminate, its history largely unexamined, unlike its more famous sister, nationalism. What aggravates its philosophical poverty, Anderson adds, is its unfortunate appropriation by the technocrats of American power. From the 1960s onward, America rose to an unrivaled economic and military prominence, ending up with the very concept of internationalism being hijacked to reconstruct the globe, as Anderson laments, in American image. In the name of this distorted kind of human solidarity, the international community under American aegis erects the unilateral right, in the chilling phrasal turns of Anderson, “to blockade, to bomb, to invade peoples or states that displease it: Cuba, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq—and to nourish, finance, and arm states that appeal to it: Turkey, Israel, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan” (24). Yes, the Philippines, too.

Confronting a similar geopolitical “reality,” Bruce Robbins is forced to present a dire conclusion. “What is clear,” he argues, “is that internationalism is in distress. Its old forms lack energy and constituency, while its new, culturally particular forms,” which involve women, ecology, peace, and human rights, among others, “have yet to define a comparable critical edge or capacity for transnational organization” (8).



To complicate this confusion and crisis, internationalism is also associated with cosmopolitanism, which is no clearer than the former, unfortunately. As Sheldon Pollock and others admit, cosmopolitanism is a project “whose conceptual content and pragmatic character are not only as yet unspecified but also must always escape positive and definitive specification” (1). The lack of conceptual clarity, however, has not prevented globalization from using such concepts to advance its logic of accumulation by dispossession. So that while it is true that human rights and cosmopolitanism represent two of the most dominant discourses for the global becoming human today, “neither human rights nor cosmopolitan solidarities,” Pheng Cheah warns, “can escape from being entangled within the field of instrumentality. They are pulled back into and find themselves mired within the imperatives and techniques of globalization” (8).

Given this context, the definition of New Internationalism becomes especially urgent in that it allows us to delineate an alternative account of internationalism whose difference lies in the fact that it is vernacular, coming from below, steeped in a tradition that is progressive and revolutionary. Unlike the internationalism of Robbins that draws its “perspective from above” (4), one that looks like a “specifically *American* program—a program that could only be proposed by and for representatives of the most powerful nation in the world” (4), as he himself admits however critically, the New Internationalism that we find in San Juan derives its meaning from the longings of a people who stand against the abuses of the powerful, an impulse that comes precisely from its anti-colonial provenance. This is the crucial difference that the New International represents. It is a form of solidarity that takes the interest of the dispossessed as its starting point, a planetary extension of sympathy that is founded on, and sensitive to, the precarity of the dispossessed, a vision of a democratic city yet to come for the subaltern. New Internationalism consequently signifies the planetary incorporation of the dispossessed as new historical agents whose vernacular vision of freedom proceeds from a non-totalizing totality.

What makes the alternative account of New Internationalism even more specific lies in the “newness” of decolonization, which brings us to the second issue, namely, the role that the latter has played in the formation of the former. To help us grapple with the radical significance of decolonization as an unprecedented historical conjuncture, we can return to Anderson’s account of the origins of internationalism as a Western phenomenon against which we shall begin to grasp the historical uniqueness of New Internationalism. Anderson tells us that internationalism in the West is best charted against nationalism. The story, of course, starts in Europe and North America in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the French and American revolutions. For the next two hundred years or so, this incestuous history of nationalism and internationalism would not leave the shores of the

Western world, not until the fateful year of 1945. “Now, finally,” writes Anderson, “the larger part of humanity enters the stage as a central force” (16). Before this, the prevailing modes of nationalism and its obverse, internationalism, had always been the dreams and abuses of the propertied class, says Anderson. Then 1945 happened when the extended dominance of the propertied class would be questioned in the form of anti-colonial nationalism from below. “Nationalism,” he claims, “becomes predominantly a popular cause, of exploited and destitute masses, in an international revolt against Western colonialism and imperialism” (16). The central sites of this revolt, needless to say, were Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and nameless peasants constituted its revolutionary base. Decolonization accordingly signaled a new historical conjuncture wherein nationalism and internationalism would be invested with new meanings beyond merely Western understanding.

The watershed moment that Anderson identifies as decolonization is exactly the same moment that has shaped the thoughts of San Juan as an intellectual, which makes them even more relevant to our attempt to reframe the affinities of internationalism. Indeed, his case is crucial because it gives a particular character to the historical experience of decolonization, one that emanates from an explicitly vernacular standpoint with a decidedly revolutionary past. In a rare instance of autobiography, San Juan personally reveals that his genealogy “really goes back to the process of decolonization begun by Amado Hernandez, Jose Lansang, Jose P. Laurel, Claro M. Recto, Lorenzo Tañada, and Renato Constantino in the 50s all the way up to the national-democratic flourishing in the late 1960s and 1970s” (*Balikbayang Sinta* xiv). Suffice it to say that the moment that marks the height of anti-colonial Filipino nationalism, whose leading lights in the 1950s all the way to the 1970s San Juan mentions, also marks the time of the publication of *The Radical Tradition in Philippine Literature*, the fount from which San Juan’s historical materialist stance emanates. This is not without significance for our attempt to define the substance of New Internationalism as the expression of the vernacular on planetary scale.

That San Juan invokes the vernacular and the planetary in the same breath should come as no surprise in that the historical condition shaping his work, namely, the age of decolonization, affords him the opportunity to suppose what would have been an abnormality in a different milieu—the hitherto unrealized coherence of the vernacular and the planetary. Cheah gestures toward this coherence in his own elucidation of cosmopolitanism and nationalism as vehicles of freedom in the context of decolonization. Before the historical moment of anti-colonialism, Cheah points out that the Western history of ideas could simply not comprehend the unity of cosmopolitanism and nationalism, which views them instead as mutually opposed. If Kant formulated his notion of cosmopolitanism prior to the emergence of nationalism, which prevented him from connecting the two, Marx saw the latter

through the lens of the bourgeois state, which prevented him from imagining its redemptive value. The partition of nationalism and cosmopolitanism would be bridged, Cheah argues, in the age of decolonization when anti-colonialism became the norm. “The most notable revaluation of the national question in socialism,” he writes, “so far has occurred in response to anticolonialist struggles” (28) during which the notion of nationality became invested with what Cheah calls a positive cultural content. Put differently, a decolonizing nation was thought to be good because it represented a departure from an existing colonial system, and such a departure from the old regime involved not one imagined community, but many. “No longer just an ideological tool of the state,” Cheah argues further, “the decolonizing nation can now serve as an agent of socialist cosmopolitanism to the extent that it attempts to save the state from the clutches of cosmopolitan capital” (29). Thus, a decolonizing nationalism finally becomes conceivable as local *and* planetary, a unity that owes itself to the peculiarity of anti-colonialism that privileges local struggle to counter a systemic enemy.<sup>5</sup>

What Cheah fails to stress, however, is the way in which nationalism is enacted not by bourgeois agents, those Bandung nationalists, as it were, who control the organs of the decolonizing state but, rather, is lived out by the masses themselves and the broad forces allied with their revolutionary causes. This is the critical gap in Cheah, and precisely the distinctive intervention that San Juan makes in our conception of internationalism that proceeds from decolonization. And the single most decisive idea that embodies San Juan’s intervention can be found in New Internationalism wherein he foregrounds the agency of the vernacular as a non-totalizing totality, a universalism with a difference whose logic he gleans from the progressive and revolutionary tradition of his homeland. If Cheah stresses the politics of the cosmopolitan, the worldly citizen, from the Greek *kosmopolitēs*, San Juan’s New Internationalism introduces us to the cosmopolitics of the vernacular, the worldly domestic, from the Latin *verna*, meaning home-born slave, but now unchained. What does this mean? Why should we pay attention to yet another language game?

San Juan’s conception of New Internationalism matters because it proposes a model quite different from previous Marxist imaginations of the international. From the founding of the First International in London in 1864 with French, Italian, and English socialists who were inspired by Marx, to the Second International in Paris in 1889 that attempted to revive the ideals of the first one, to the 1919 congress of the Third International led by Russian Bolsheviks who promoted the overthrow of the global bourgeoisie and the support of anti-colonial struggle in the imperial peripheries, to the breakaway Fourth International organized in 1938 in France by Trotsky and his followers to counter Stalinism, internationalism had remained a European affair, unable to countenance the aspirations of those from the margins.

Then the moment of vernacular uprisings in the age of decolonization came, which changed the form and substance of human solidarity. San Juan allows us precisely to grasp the kind of internationalism that springs from below. Decolonization, as I have tried to explain earlier, constitutes a key element of this New Internationalism, one that highlights the analytical uses of vernacularism in reimagining solidarity on a planetary scale. To be sure, two key elements define the newness of the New International: decolonization plus vernacularism. On one hand, decolonization makes possible the unity of nationalism and internationalism as vehicles of subaltern freedom. On the other, the vernacular distinguishes the planetary imagination of the New International whose characteristics San Juan helps us to see as a practice of vernacular world making, one that the nameless and vulnerable enact to create a life without dispossession.

What is more, San Juan provides us with a distinct formulation of solidarity that allows us to appreciate the place of the vernacular in comprehending the logics of social inequality and agency. As Matthew Hart observes in his study of modernist poetry and its appropriations of dialects, “conversations about vernacular language are inseparable from questions of political sovereignty and social inequality” (12). Hart goes on to conclude that “the vernacular is not just a linguistic problem; it is a discourse of power” (12), one that performs a “politically *representative* function in that it stands in for the otherwise unspeakable reality of social exclusion and anomie” (13). We encounter the full force of Hart’s theory in San Juan’s deployment of the vernacular in which the term stands in for the Filipino revolutionary tradition that energizes the will to end social exclusion and anomie in whatever form, the same will that propels the unfinished revolution of progressive Filipinos across the planet today.

In a late essay entitled “African American Internationalism and Solidarity with the Philippine Revolution,” San Juan clarifies the potential of such vernacular internationalism, positing the connection between African American and Filipino forms of vernacular world making. He comments particularly on the life story of the African American soldier David Fagen who deserted the American forces after landing in the Philippines in June of 1899. Fagen was among the thirty or so black deserters, but the only one to be remembered because he enlisted in the revolutionary army of Emilio Aguinaldo, then president of the first democratic republic in Asia that the United States of America tried to abort a year after its founding in 1898. For San Juan, Fagen’s story is a vital political allegory in which a black subaltern finds his redemption in the anti-colonial struggle, embracing “the revolution with such boldness and energy that no one could be blind to the depth of his commitment to the Filipino cause” (51). In San Juan’s view, Fagen testifies to the shared futures of peoples with deracinated pasts, a subaltern witness to the urgency and power of vernacular internationalism:

Given the prevalence of white supremacy, Fagen's act may be taken as a complete repudiation of that juridico-political order. His refusal to surrender confirms his choice as a moral and political act of self-determination. To join a revolutionary movement resisting a colonial power and its history of slavery and racialized subjugation is to reaffirm the right of collective self-determination. It is to reaffirm a long tradition of revolt against a slave-system. Further, in contradistinction to the earlier maroon revolts which sought to restore a pre-capitalist or pre-feudal order in an isolated place, Fagen's decision to join the Filipino anti-colonial struggle—a struggle comparable to Haiti's revolution against the French, with the qualification that the US in 1899 was a fully industrialized capitalist power—is to affirm a new level of dissent which, at the threshold of the era of finance-capital and imperial conquest, acquires a global transnational resonance. (39)

San Juan makes a remarkable connection here, suggesting that Fagen may be an embodiment of a different genealogy that can explain the rise of black internationalism. The difference being that Fagen threw in his lot with the Filipino struggle against colonialism, a deed that would make him, in the words of San Juan, "an exemplary figure of the politics of self-determination for enslaved and subjugated communities" (39). In doing so, Fagen had anticipated the internationalism of W.E.B. Du Bois who saw the color line extending in Asia and the islands of the sea, of Marcus Garvey who imagined Africa as the ideal homeland for the blacks of Harlem, of Harold Cruse who got radicalized by his encounter with the native revolt against the French in Algeria, of Malcolm X whose nationalism was reinforced by his interest in the Third World, and of Bill Fletcher, Jr. who refused to recognize the Bush administration's labeling of the Filipino communist insurgency, currently one of the world's longest running revolts, as an act of terror. Seen this way, the vernacularism that lies at the heart of the radical Filipino tradition finds its equal in the vernacularism of black internationalism.<sup>6</sup> It can be recalled that Fagen, fighting with Filipino revolutionaries, was reported to have mocked US soldiers by shouting, "Captain Fagen's done got yuh white boys now" (quoted in San Juan). That gleeful insult contains the shared spirit of two distinct peoples with distinct histories who express their common investment in seeing the dissolution of social exclusion and anomie: a brown struggle expressed in a black vernacular meant to end dispossession, everywhere. The vernacular model of international solidarity that the radical Filipino tradition offers is therefore a unique yet moveable paradigm wherein "the Philippine project of national liberation," as San Juan writes, "does not simply mimic a Eurocentric model but articulates the manifold demands of women, indigenous communities, youth, racial/ethnic, and gendered minorities in a new paradigm of radical collective transformation" (62).

We must hold this new paradigm in our mind, this New Internationalism, if only because it makes us see that the nameless better our histories. That freedom need

not be exclusive in which the liberty of some leads to the dispossession of many but, rather, manifold, outward, self-liberating. That those who have been displaced, torn off from their roots because of brute necessity—the prisoners on a small island whose “discovery” inaugurated European expansion in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the OFWs in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Rome, Singapore, and Hong Kong today—have the breadth of vision to connect their destinies to the lives of others. So much depends, then, on recovering the radical meaning of New Internationalism that arose in the period of decolonization, which the vernacular longings of Filipino revolutionaries from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward had long anticipated. Now we behold once more its radiance that lights the path to a future worthy of the dignity and strength of ordinary people on earth—the dispossessed who make other freedoms possible.



## Notes

1. See San Juan, Jr., *The Art of Oscar Wilde*. While doing graduate studies at Yale University from late 2005 to early 2011, I had seen this book being circulated at the Cross Campus Library, now renamed Bass Library, where the most borrowed volumes are stored for easy access. It is fair to think that the book remains an important volume in the study of Victorian literature in the West, specifically in the United States. It was adjudged, after all, as the best graduate work in English upon its submission as a dissertation at Harvard University.
2. This refers to the symposium “The Places of E. San Juan, Jr.” honoring San Juan that I organized for *Kritika Kultura* at Ateneo de Manila University in March of 2015, where an early draft of this article was first presented. The writing of this article was generously supported by the Office of the Dean, School of Humanities.
3. Charlie Samuya Veric, “The Planet as Homeland.” In San Juan, Jr., *From Globalization to National Liberation: Essays of Three Decades*. See also my intervention in his debate with Virgilio Almario where I propose that Philippine literature is better understood as a new model of world literature, “What the Planetary Filipino Should Know: San Juan Versus Almario.”
4. See, for example, the work of Soledad Reyes who views the Marxist stance of San Juan as rather simplistic, “Philippine Literary Studies (1970–85): Some Preliminary Notes.”
5. For an extended discussion of the dialectic between the national and planetary in the context of decolonization, see my essay in *Social Text*.
6. For a discussion of the place of the vernacular in the African American tradition, see the work of Houston Baker, Jr. and Russell Potter who both locate the centrality of the concept in black cultural expressions.



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